

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 547

SP 017 807

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TITLE The Transition from Student of Reading Methods to Teacher of Reading.
NOTE 16p.
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; Basic Skills; Classroom Techniques; Cooperating Teachers; Elementary School Teachers; Higher Education; Lesson Plans; *Methods Courses; Preservice Teacher Education; *Reading Instruction; *Student Teachers; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Influence; *Teaching Experience

ABSTRACT

Teacher educators are concerned about the limited impact that methods courses have on instructional practices and the considerable impact that cooperating teachers have. The experiences of student teachers who taught in elementary reading practica without the presence of cooperating teachers were analyzed. Five student teachers were observed by and held conferences with a university supervisor and the school principal during a twelve week period in which they participated in all of the activities of a typical elementary teacher. It was concluded that even preservice teachers who do not have a cooperating teacher change their views of appropriate reading instruction so that they often become dissonant with the views they held immediately after finishing a reading methods course. Possibilities for improving the effectiveness of reading methods courses are discussed. (Author/JD)

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ED200547

The Transition from Student of Reading Methods to Teacher
of Reading

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Teacher educators are concerned about the limited impact that methods courses have on instructional practices and the considerable impact that cooperating teachers have. The purpose of this study, analyzing the experiences of pre-service teachers who taught in practica without cooperating teachers, was to determine the variables influencing their instructional decisions and to ascertain the degree of correspondence to the practices prescribed in their methods course. Data were gathered through interviews and classroom observations. Recommendations for improving pre-service reading instruction concern the timing and content of the methods program based on the concepts of "readiness to learn" and "need to know."

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The Transition from Student of Reading Methods to Teacher of Reading

Introduction:

Before I begin to tell you about the work in which I have been involved over the past two years, I'd like you to eavesdrop on a conversation you might hear in any room where teacher educators meet. The participants are a student teaching supervisor and a reading methods instructor.

Supervisor: I observed one of the students teaching a reading group called the Buzzards while I was out supervising today . They were sitting in a circle reading out loud--you know, that round robin stuff. Didn't you say that's a bad way to teach reading?

Reading instructor: Yep! You know I spend at least 2 hours every semester telling those students about the evils of round robin reading. That student should know better. Who is his cooperating teacher?

Supervisor: Oh, he's over at the J. R. Ewing School in Ms. Tradition's room.

Reading instructor: Well, that explains it. If you put students in rooms with cooperating teachers like that what can you expect?

As their reading methods course fades into past experience numerous student teachers change their views toward the teaching of reading in ways that are dissonant with views recommended in earlier reading methods courses but consonant with the teaching practices of their cooperating teachers. A review of the literature reveals a continuing concern on the part of teacher educator about the limited impact that methods courses have on teaching practices both during student teaching and after and the considerable impact that cooperating teachers have on their student teacher's approaches to reading. If, however, pre-service teachers student

teach in a classroom without the influence of a cooperating teacher, might their views toward teaching remain consonant with those espoused in the methods course? Would such an experience strengthen the impact of the course or would there be other variables that dilute that impact?

Last year I was able to take advantage of an experimental student teaching practicum supervised by two of my colleagues. They had convinced a local school district to provide them with a classroom of 15 third and fourth graders. During the fall semester 3 student teachers were jointly responsible for all instruction, then during the spring semester 2 new student teachers shared that same responsibility. There was no cooperating teacher present at any time.

My study describes and analyzes the experiences of those five pre-service teachers who taught in the experimental practicum without cooperating teachers. The purpose of the study was to determine both the variables influencing the instructional decisions of the students and to determine why these decisions did or did not correspond to the methods prescribed in the earlier reading course.

Methodology

The five subjects participating in the study were seniors who had been selected by a faculty panel to take part in the experimental practicum. Because they followed the regular school district calendar, their student teaching experiences were longer than the usual 12 week university practicum and they participated in all of the activities that a typical elementary teacher in that school district does. Although there were no cooperating teachers, the students were frequently observed by and held conferences with a university supervisor and the school principal. They

had all participated in a reading methods course the semester prior to the practicum.

Data were gathered through interviews and observations. The reading methods instructor and his teaching assistants were interviewed to gather information regarding the content that was covered, the reading practices recommended or discouraged, the assignments given, and the text and outside readings used. Prior to the practicum, the student teachers were interviewed to ascertain their views on teaching reading and what they hoped to gain from the practicum to further prepare them to teach it. The university supervisors were also interviewed about their ideas regarding the teaching of reading.

The students were each observed four times in their classroom while teaching reading. Additional post-observation time was set aside for discussion with the students and when possible the supervisor. Following the practicum, interviews were conducted with the students to discover why they used particular organizational patterns, materials, and instructional procedures.

The data collected from the observations were compared and contrasted to student interviews as well as to the data obtained regarding the methods course content. The results reported below are a summary of those comparisons.

Results

Reading methods course. The 16 week section of Elementary Education 336, Fundamentals of Reading Techniques, which the students had taken prior to student teaching met twice a week. One 2-hour class period involved a lecture given by the instructor, an elementary education

faculty member. The other 1 hour class period was a discussion session led by teaching assistants.

The students used Farr and Roser's text, Teaching a Child to Read, Heilman's book, Phonics in Proper Perspective, and Silvaroli's, Classroom Reading Inventory as textbooks. They had to take two hourly exams and a final, to write one research paper, and to administer the CRI to one child. In addition, discussion leaders gave short assignments relating to basal readers, comprehension questions, and readiness. Lecture topics included such typical themes as readiness, diagnosis, various methods of teaching reading, matching students and materials, teaching reading in the content areas, and organizing classrooms.

Pre-practicum interview. The fact that the methods course had an initial impact on the students was obvious from the answers to questions in the pre-interviews. The pre-service teachers began the practicum voicing a desire to implement many of the instructional procedures discussed in the reading methods course. When asked what their broad goals for reading instruction were they each mentioned such things as:

1. developing fluent silent readers through motivating techniques and word recognition and comprehension skills instruction.
2. developing a positive attitude toward reading by allowing children to read materials in which they were interested and by introducing them to a wide variety of reading materials.
3. supplementing basal procedures and materials with a wide variety of individualized methods and materials. Literature groups, teacher-made materials, the language experience approach and learning centers were popular choices.
4. diversifying the organizational pattern beyond achievement groups. Interest and skill groups were mentioned by all five of the students, individualized reading programs were also high on the list for alternative organizational schemes.
5. diagnosing formally and informally on a continuing basis. All five students mentioned using an Informal Reading Inventory as a way of matching students to materials and finding out about

their abilities and needs. Each expressed a hope that he or she could "keep on top of things" through the year by observing and talking with their class.

However, it must be noted that though they could express general guidelines, in many areas these students felt anxious about the "how-to-do" specifics of teaching reading. One student put it this way, "I feel reading is very important and it scares me as a teacher. I realize the responsibility that I have. I want the children to learn to read well and also to want to read. But I don't feel that 336 prepared me to work with slow readers, or to keep 20 kids busy while I work with 6, you know, management." Another said, "I know I'm going to have trouble teaching skills. I mean I know what the content of phonics is, but I don't know how to teach any of it. I know you should teach a skill when you see a need for it but I don't think I'll know how unless there is something in the basal." Still a third commented, "I'm really scared about teaching slow readers. It worries me if I'll be sure how to help them. I don't know anything about the sequence of skills... what they should know before I teach something else or even how to teach it." A fourth added, "I'm afraid I don't know how to judge a worksheet. In my methods class they said we probably wouldn't need to use all of the worksheets included in the workbook but how do I know if they are good or bad?"

Each of these students expressed a hope that the student teaching experience would help them gain confidence in teaching reading. One stated, "This is where I'm hoping to try out some ideas. We got a lot of theoretical information from our methods class but that's not very helpful." Another hoped to "find out how to organize kids who have a variety of needs." And over and over I heard the wish that "I'll find out where to start with skills, and how to present and teach them so that the kids will really know them."

Observations. As indicated earlier, I observed each of the students teaching several times during their practicum. I was careful to schedule my visits so that at least one observation per student was during the first or second week of the semester and that the final observation was during the latter part of the semester when each one had complete control of the entire room. I would like to give you a full description of those observations but time doesn't allow that. What I must say is that the data show that each student was apparently overwhelmed by the actual experiences of teaching reading. Let me relate a few incidents that pertain to the 5 goals discussed earlier.

1. Although each student had expressed a desire to develop fluent silent readers, much of the time reading groups (and this was 3 and 4th grade) consisted of oral round robin reading, even in the highest reading group which only had 3 children in it. SSR was a part of the class only when something else didn't run over into its allotted 20 minutes.
2. While all of the students were concerned about allowing children to read material that interested them, their early attempts at such things as literature groups and an integrated social studies and reading program floundered.
3. As the semester went on the basals became more and more the only reading material used. And although they all expressed a desire to use basal material in a selective manner by the end of the semester the basal had come to completely dominate their lesson planning. Teacher-made materials were introduced less and less.
4. The early attempts to individualize reading, that two of the students tried, slowly disappeared. The four achievement groups which were formed at the beginning of each semester became unchanging.
5. The informal reading inventories that were administered were looked at briefly for instructional levels but were then put in file drawers as were the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Tests which the school district required that each teacher give. No attempts were made to look for strength and weaknesses, even for the lowest readers who were about 2 years below grade level. No attempts were made to keep informal records of the children's progress through the year.

I do not want to leave a false impression of these five student teachers. They did try some innovative ideas now and then. They certainly worked hard. One young lady got up at 5 a.m., stayed at school each day until at least 5 p.m., and often worked until 11 or 12 midnight on activities for the next day or on such things as bulletin boards. Each student took time out to observe other teachers in the district. They also met with me for specific reading suggestions. They scoured book stores and libraries for resource books on how to teach such things as sight words and word recognition skills. Each of them cared for the welfare and education of the children. Some of them cared so much that they literally cried with frustration. My own personal judgment leads me to believe that with more experience and knowledge 4 of the 5 students will be above average teachers and that the fifth will do well given the right environment. They will survive.

Post interview. Earlier I noted that research indicates that many students undergo a change of values during student teaching bringing them more in line with the values held by their cooperating teacher. In this instance there was no cooperating teacher to conveniently blame for the changes observed. Why then, do the data indicate that many of the judgments about instructional decisions made by these students ran counter to the methods prescribed in their reading methods course and, in some cases, counter to their earlier personal views? During the post interviews I asked the students to reflect on their experiences and try to explicate some of the variables which they thought had influenced their instructional decision-making process.

1. School pressures was the first variable mentioned by each student. When they attempted to use an individualized reading program with

one of their reading groups or tried to change basals, they were told by both the principal and other teachers in the school that reading instruction was to come from a basal and that only a certain basal could be used. The students were also strongly urged by some school personnel to teach using conventional reading groups. It wasn't until almost the last month of school that the students found that some veteran teachers in the school had managed to "get around" these "rules." The student teachers had been told in 536 that many school reading programs were basal-oriented but they had not been provided with practical assignments which would help them to use a basal wisely and also provide enrichment and/or remediation through other means. A frequently heard comment was, "I considered changing basals but the administration was against it. My low group was in the dullest basal around." or "There weren't other materials available. I tried to do a literature group with my low readers but I couldn't find 3 of any book which was easy enough for them to read."

2. Lack of confidence was another variable often mentioned. Basal materials were followed closely and seldom supplemented because the student felt something "important" might be missed and because they were not sure of either their ability to diagnose skill needs or to teach the skills on their own. One student commented, "I didn't like the workbooks and I didn't like the way I set things up, but I didn't know and still don't know what else to do." Another stated, "I felt so frustrated. I don't know how to unlock what was wrong. Kids read how they read--that's frustrating." Still a third said, "I'm still scared. I don't know how to teach sight words or skills. If I get a job teaching first grade my kids will never learn to read. I like to

discuss books, ask comprehension questions, get into character development and plot. I hope I get an intermediate job." Although the methods course taught the content of reading, these students didn't have a good grasp of the methods used to teach that content.

3. Classroom survival was also an important variable influencing their decision making process. Management and control were often the most immediate concerns. Sometimes just keeping 15 children quiet and busy became the primary reason for an assignment. One student noted, "These children didn't know how to behave, they worked inefficiently and were irresponsible." Another commented, "My frustration came from discipline problems. These children lacked common social skills. I always had to spend so much time keeping them quiet that I hardly had time to teach anything." Although the methods course discussed classroom management and organization, the students did not have the opportunity to practice the techniques, so they tended to forget them or underestimate their importance. Perhaps they were not ready to learn at that time. It appears that they needed the instruction regarding organization and management when they were faced with the reality of the situation or they needed to be able to practice it earlier.
4. Limited time was another important variable. Other subjects had to be taught too. "My curriculum was controlled by time and the kids' behavior," said one student. "All of the neat things I wanted to do took too much time. I never had enough time to give background or teach vocabulary, we'd just read the story and do the worksheets." Another commented, "It's so hard to juggle time and keep kids on task with things to do. I didn't have enough independent activities

ready to keep individual kids working while I worked with a group and I found I had little time to make or plan activities. The few fun things I had at the beginning reverted to read this, do that.. There was too little time to diagnose problems. A student said, "There was no planning time so we just continued doing what we hadn't finished the day before. I never did have time to plan a week ahead or diagnose specific problems." Listening to group oral reading, getting through the basal, and grading worksheets became important concerns for these students who had not had practice in making up activities, diagnosing, or who were not familiar with resources which could have helped.

5. The content of the methods course was also an important variable in the decision-making process for these students. It was a case of too much too soon and not enough soon enough. The topics emphasized in the course did not make an impact upon the students until they actually experienced those elements of the reading program; but by then it was too late. They had forgotten much of what they had heard. In addition, some important topics, such as dealing with outside pressures, did not appear to be covered at all.

Typical comments were, "I learned what reading was supposed to consist of--you know graphemes, phonemes, that stuff, but we need more than 1 course in reading. I'd call 336 a theory course--kind of--what is the content of reading. But we also need a course on how to teach those things." Another said, "There's too much to reading that one course cannot cover. We'll get a degree with 1 course but I hope someday they require two.*" A third claimed, "We got a lot about what not to do but we didn't get any suggestions for

what to do instead... like don't depend on round robin reading. Fine, but what do I do when someone says they like to read orally? I didn't know any other way to do oral reading." A fourth mentioned, "In the whole university there is not enough hands on--we need to be out working while we are learning. We need to have situations where we can say--here's how I'd handle that. You can't be taught some things in isolation, you have to be thrown into a situation. I got the feeling in 336 that everything was peachy and joy in the classroom. Let me tell you it's not!! That class was not the real world." And finally, "I'm going to take more courses. I need to learn more. This experience was good because I see what I don't know. I'll be more attentive, looking for things to help me. Now I know I don't like workbooks, and I don't like things the way I organized them but I don't know what to do instead. I'm just getting a feel for how things are going. What I've just done has been pure pain but it will help next year."

Conclusions and Implications

Teacher educators have been too ready to blame the impact of the cooperating teacher or the pre-service teacher for many of the poor teaching practices seen in student teaching situations and later in regular classrooms. Even though the validity of the self-reports of actors in a situation is often questionable, I strongly believe that the cross-checking of the interview data with the observational data in this study indicate that we cannot make the cooperating teacher the scapegoat in all of these situations. The results of the interviews and observations illustrate that even pre-service teachers who do not have a cooperating teacher change their views of appropriate reading instruction so that they often become

dissonant with those espoused by the same pre-service teachers immediately after finishing a reading methods course.

When those student teachers expressed the fear of being unsure of "how to teach," they meant that they were unsure of how to present a reading lesson or of the sequence of skills, they were not ready to provide activities for practice, and they were uncertain how to diagnose pupils' needs. While there is no magic in "how to teach", it is imperative that we introduce our pre-service teachers to the simple steps of apprising students in a classroom of what they are trying to teach and why it is important, of demonstrating and modeling skills, of giving practice in the skills, of providing feedback, and of recycling the students who have difficulty.

It is imperative that we help them to be aware of the fact that while there may be no research—established sequence of reading skills, there are resources from which they might draw on to establish what might be the next step for their students, and where to find activities that might reinforce their direct verbal instruction. Finally it is imperative that we teach our preservice students to diagnose their pupils' needs in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

However even that is not sufficient because a reading methods course must do more than simply present the content and a few skills and resources. As we apprise our pre-service teachers of the importance of such "how to teach steps" and other techniques and resources just described, we must be cognizant of the fact that a simple level of awareness is not enough. Our pre-service teachers, too, must receive practice and feedback in using these methods. They, too, must be recycled if their learning is not complete.

Results such as those reported earlier suggest the conclusion that instruction in the teaching of reading should be a continual process that begins with a pre-service course which offers some basic instruction interspersed with real or video-taped observations of classroom teaching which reflect the instruction discussed in class. In addition, the students should be allowed to "try out" some reading lessons to prepare themselves for their student teaching practicum. Instruction should continue into student teaching, where it would provide support, enrichment and remediation if necessary. It should follow student teaching so that pre-service teachers can benefit from their new understandings of what teaching reading in a "real world" classroom is all about. And, in the best of all worlds, it should be coordinated with in-service teaching so that the new situations, demands, and pressures that the neophyte teacher will experience can be met with further instruction and guidance. None of these ideas is new. Programs at other institutions have included such diverse offerings as pre-service tutoring experiences, the protocol movements with its associated video tapes and films, microteaching, combined reading methods/practicum courses, and performance or competency field-based experiences. However none of these various offerings have been adequately evaluated to convince most of us of their worth. Professional educators who are designing these alternative teacher preparation programs appear to be operating on "expert hunches." Surely we can find a more constructive way to devise better undergraduate teacher preparation programs in reading.

I suggest that there is a need for longitudinal studies which take a more in-depth look at variables, such as those discussed in this report,

which have the greatest effect on forming and changing pre-service teacher's attitudes, beliefs, and teaching practices. For instance, does coursework in reading have any long term effect on the beliefs and teaching practices of pre-service teachers if that coursework is not directly related to the pressures and day to day responsibilities connected with classroom teaching? What are the most important components of that coursework? Does the placement of reading methods courses before, during, after the practicum or all three have any bearing on the formation of beliefs and attitudes? Will direct observation of superior teaching help? What about using films or video tapes of those same superior teachers? Do analytical discussions that follow the viewing of films stimulate reflection in a student? Answers to questions such as these can only be found by well evaluated longitudinal studies which might begin to identify ways that we can help pre-service teachers make better informed instructional decisions.